

Breeding Ability Is Not A Measurement Of Good Health

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By Sam Vaughn, DVM, Dip., ABVP—Avian Practice

My scarlet macaws have been great producers for five years. This year, they have not laid and seem to be depressed. They are on a good diet of mixed seeds, nuts and fresh fruits and vegetables. We have water bottles, not bowls, and Vita-Lites are the source of UV light. We have taken them to a veterinarian to see if anything is physically wrong, because they have always produced and seemed so healthy. I'm sure they are not sick, but was wondering if you could tell me why they are not producing.

It sounds like you have a nice environment for your birds. Proper lighting and clean water are very important parts of husbandry. However, several assumptions you have made concern me as a scientist. Seeds are not a good diet, organically based formulated rations with proper vitamins and minerals are a good diet. I would bet that, on a blood chemistry panel, the hen would show a marginal to low blood calcium level and a low blood protein, and possibly a low red blood cell count (anemia).

I am sure these birds still look healthy and sassy. The fact that they have produced has absolutely nothing to do with them being healthy. If we draw a corollary to human health, we find that the world's most underdeveloped countries have the highest birth rates. The adults are malnourished, have poor hygiene and have terrible dental disease, but they bear children nonetheless. This is always a good story for me to give to breeders in my practice when they assume that a pair has been "healthy" for many years.

I will never forget one case in particular: A pair of Moluccan cockatoos had been a client's best producing pair for 12 years. The male was ready to go to nest one spring, but not the female. If you are a cockatoo breeder you know the next sentence. The male attacked the female and tore part of her upper beak off, and bleeding ensued. The breeder presented the hen to have its beak repaired. I suggested blood work and X-rays, and the client said, "Dr. Vaughn, you are just trying to spend my money and run up a bill. I know these birds are healthy. They have been in my aviary for 14 years and producing for 12 years, two clutches per year, every year!" Well, I bit my tongue and told the underdeveloped country story, and the lady let me take an X-ray of the hen. I found a huge granuloma in the caudal thoracic air sac (Aspergillosis). Surgical removal was successful, and the hen was treated with amphotericin-B intravenously for three days and released. This hen had a white blood count (WBC) of 18,000 with an increase in monocytes. This is an increased white count, but a very small increase. Had this been my only test I would not have been suspicious. The bird made a complete recovery and went back to laying eggs and producing babies. Radiographs found something I did not have a clue about and resulted in my ability to save this bird's life, and many others since she was a good producing hen.

So the client spent some money, and the bird survived a disease that would have been fatal without intervention. The client also made much more money, because the bird was placed back into the aviary better than she came out. Some investigation revealed that the shavings in the nest boxes were loaded with *Aspergillus* spores. All nest boxes were cleaned out, and a new source of bedding was found.

Moral to the story: Do not assume that your birds are healthy. Test, test, test! Then hope that the test results were reliable, and your birds are, indeed, healthy.

I would take the scarlets to your avian vet, or better yet, have your avian vet come to your facility so they can see what is happening in the environment. Many times when I can visit a facility, I gather more information than any conversation can ever produce.

Good luck with your scarlets and may they produce well for you in the future!

If you have a question for Dr. Vaughn, send him an e-mail care of Bird Breeder at birdbreeder@fancypubs.com. We regret that columnists are not able to respond to letters individually.

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